The Iron Bloom

A Romantasy Novel

Chapter One: The Choosing

The forge had been cold for three days, and Wren Ashcombe's hands had not stopped shaking since.

Her father's hammer still hung on its peg above the anvil, untouched. He'd been the one who was supposed to attend the Choosing this year — village elders always sent the strongest, steadiest household to represent Ashgrove at the ceremony, and steady was the one thing Corin Ashcombe had always been. But a fever had taken him to his bed two nights before the ceremony, and someone from their house had to stand in the square when the Sylvan envoy arrived, or the whole village would answer for the insult.

So it was Wren, in her father's good coat with the sleeves rolled twice, standing at the very back of a crowd of nearly four hundred people, when the envoy raised her silver bell and the world went very quiet.

The Choosing was old magic dressed up as ceremony. Once every generation, the Sylvan Court sent a bell-bearer down from Duskwood to select a mortal — the Bloombearer — whose blood would renew the pact that kept Veyth's fields fertile, its rivers running, its winters survivable. It was supposed to be an honor. It was supposed to go to someone from a noble house, someone trained since childhood for the weight of it.

The bell rang once. Twice.

On the third ring, the sound didn't fade the way it should have. It sank into Wren's chest instead, curling around her ribs like a hand closing over a coal, and she gasped before she understood why — before she looked down and saw the faint iron-dark lines spreading up from her wrist, blooming under her skin like frost taking a windowpane, except backward, except *warm*.

The crowd around her went very still. Someone screamed. Someone else laughed, high and startled.

The envoy lowered her bell, walked through four hundred parting bodies without seeming to hurry, and stopped in front of a blacksmith's daughter in a coat too big for her.

"Wren Ashcombe," the envoy said, though no one had told her the name. "The Court has chosen."

They gave her one hour to say goodbye. It was not enough, and everyone in Ashgrove seemed to know it, which was somehow worse than if no one had.

Her father, fever-bright and furious, tried to stand and was pushed gently back into bed by her mother, who had stopped weeping only long enough to pack a satchel of bread and dried apples that Wren would never eat, because the Sylvan Court did not let its Bloombearers carry mortal food across the border. She didn't know that yet. She would learn a great many things she didn't know yet, in the days that followed, usually at the worst possible moment.

"You weren't supposed to be there," her father said, gripping her hand too hard. "It should have been me. It should never have been you at all — the Choosing skips smithing families, it always has, there's some old rule about it—"

"Then maybe the Court broke its own rule," Wren said, because someone had to say something calm, and it clearly wasn't going to be him. "Maybe it doesn't matter now."

It mattered. She would understand exactly how much it mattered before the week was through.

The road to Duskwood was not really a road. It was a seam in the world that opened only for those the Court had marked, and Wren felt it the moment she crossed the tree line — the ordinary hush of an ordinary forest giving way to something with a *pulse*, moss glowing faintly blue-green underfoot, the air tasting of struck flint and rain that hadn't fallen yet.

The envoy did not speak to her again until the trees began to thin and a shape rose ahead of them that Wren's mind kept trying and failing to hold steady — towers grown rather than built, pale wood twisted into impossible arches, lit from within by something that was not fire.

"You will meet your Warden tonight," the envoy said. "Do not be foolish enough to lie to him. He will know."

"My what?"

But the envoy was already gone, and Wren was left alone at the edge of a court that had just decided, on a whim of old magic, that the rest of her life belonged to it.

Chapter Two: The Duskwood Gate

He was waiting at the base of the tower stairs, and Wren's first thought — absurd, unwelcome, immediate

— was that he looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Rowan Duskvale was tall in the particular way that made a room feel smaller, dressed in unadorned grey that should have looked plain and instead looked deliberate, like a blade kept unpolished on purpose. His eyes were the flat green-gold of late autumn light, and they moved over her once, assessing, the way her father assessed a piece of iron before deciding whether it was worth the forge's heat.

"You're not who I expected," he said.

"I get that a lot today."

Something flickered at the corner of his mouth that was almost, and did not become, a smile. "The Choosing marks its Bloombearer at random. It does not explain itself. I was told to expect a noble's daughter with a decade of etiquette training. Instead the bell rang for—" He stopped himself.

"A blacksmith's daughter," Wren finished. "Say it. I already know what I am."

"You know what you *were*," Rowan said. "You have very little idea what you are now. That's not an insult. It's simply true of every Bloombearer the Court has ever chosen." He turned, cloak moving like something with its own intent, and started up the stairs without checking whether she'd follow. "I am your Warden. I

keep you alive until the binding takes, and I keep the binding stable after. Everything else is negotiable. That is not."

"And if I don't want a Warden?"

"Then you die within the season, and the pact fails, and Veyth loses its harvests for a generation." He said it without cruelty, which somehow made it land harder than cruelty would have. "You didn't ask for this. I understand that better than you think. But you're here, and the bell rang, and wanting out doesn't change what's already in your blood."

Wren looked down at her wrist, at the iron-dark lines still faintly visible beneath her sleeve, warm as a coal that refused to go out.

"Fine," she said. "Then teach me what I am."

The tower room they gave her had no lock on the inside, which she noticed immediately and said nothing about. It had a window that looked out over Duskwood's canopy, silver-blue and endless, and a wardrobe full of clothes in her exact size that no one admitted to measuring her for.

Rowan came at dusk, as promised, and did not sit.

"The binding ritual happens in three days, at the dark of the new moon. Until then, you'll wear iron against your skin at all times — that bracelet, don't take it off, not even to bathe. It keeps your new magic from surging before your body's ready to hold it." He set a slim iron cuff on the table between them, unadorned, cold to the touch when she picked it up. "Ignore anyone at Court who tells you Bloombearers are ornamental. You are the only thing standing between the Sylvan Court and a slow magical famine, and there are people here who resent you for it before they've even met you."

"Comforting," Wren said, sliding the cuff onto her wrist. The moment it closed, the warmth in her chest banked down to something manageable, and she exhaled like she hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath since the square in Ashgrove.

"I'm not here to comfort you," Rowan said. "I'm here to keep you standing. Those aren't the same job, and I'd rather you know that now than resent me for it later."

He left before she could decide whether that honesty made her trust him more or considerably less.

Chapter Three: The Binding

The three days passed in a blur of lessons Wren hadn't asked for and didn't fully understand — how to walk through a Sylvan hall without accidentally accepting a bargain, which fae titles required a bow and which required none at all, why she must never, under any circumstance, thank a Court fae for a kindness before understanding its price.

Rowan taught her all of it with the patience of a man repeating instructions he'd given before and would likely give again, and it was on the second night, when she asked him outright how many Bloombearers he'd Wardened, that his patience finally cracked, just slightly, just enough to show her something underneath.

"You're the first," he said.

"That's not comforting either."

"I didn't say it to comfort you. I said it because you deserve to know the man keeping you alive is guessing half the time, same as you." He looked at her then, really looked, in a way that made the iron cuff at her wrist feel suddenly very thin. "I volunteered for this position, Wren. I want you to understand that. No one assigned me to you."

"Why would you volunteer for a job no one's done before?"

He didn't answer. He changed the subject to bowing etiquette instead, and Wren let him, though she noticed — she would keep noticing, for days afterward — that he hadn't actually said no to the question underneath.

The binding ritual took place in a grove at the heart of Duskwood, under trees so old their bark had gone silver, in front of a gathering of Court fae whose faces Wren couldn't read and whose silence felt like judgment she hadn't earned yet.

They removed the iron cuff. The warmth in her chest surged back instantly, fiercer now, and Rowan's hand closed around her wrist — not to stop her, she understood after a startled second, but to *anchor* her, his own magic threading into hers like a rope thrown to someone in open water.

"Don't fight it," he said, low, only for her. "Let it find the shape of you. It already knows. You just have to stop being afraid of it long enough to let it show you."

The Bloom came up through her like something being born rather than something being given — dark iron lines spreading from her wrist to her collarbone, and where they passed, small pale flowers unfurled directly from her skin, blooming and closing and blooming again, impossible and undeniable. She

heard herself gasp. She heard, distantly, the gathered Court murmuring something that might have been approval or might have been alarm.

When it settled, when the flowers stilled into faint silver-white scars along her collarbone like a constellation only she would ever fully see, Rowan was still holding her wrist, and his expression had lost every trace of the careful distance he'd worn since the base of the tower stairs.

"There you are," he said, quiet enough that only she could hear it, and Wren understood, with the particular clarity of someone who has just survived something enormous, that whatever this was between them, it had already stopped being simple.

Chapter Four: Threads of Court

The trouble started, as trouble at Court so often did, with a smile that gave away nothing.

Lady Isolde Nightshade found Wren three days after the binding, in the Court's long glass gallery, and complimented her Bloom-marks with a warmth so perfectly calibrated it took Wren nearly a full minute to recognize it as a blade.

"How fortunate," Isolde said, "that the bell chose someone so — resilient. The last two candidates the

Council favored were considerably more fragile. One does wonder what the Court intends, elevating a smith's daughter over houses that have served the pact for centuries."

"The bell doesn't ask permission," Wren said, because Rowan had taught her that much — never apologize for the Choosing, never explain it, it explains itself or it doesn't at all. "I didn't elevate myself. I just didn't die."

Something in Isolde's expression sharpened, just for a second, before smoothing back into practiced pleasantness. "No. You didn't. How very interesting that you didn't."

She left before Wren could ask what she meant by it, and Wren spent the rest of the afternoon turning the words over like a stone with a crack she couldn't quite see the bottom of.

She told Rowan that evening, in the small study off her tower room where he'd taken to reviewing Court correspondence while she practiced containing the Bloom's warmth without a full physical bloom breaking through her skin — a skill that turned out to require less magical discipline and more simple, stubborn breathing.

Rowan went very still when she repeated Isolde's words.

"She's Chancellor Vane's cousin," he said. "On the mortal side. Half the Council has mortal relations they don't advertise — old bloodlines, older bargains. If Isolde is circling you, it isn't idle curiosity."

"Chancellor Vane. The one who runs Veyth's council."

"The one who has spent the last decade arguing that the pact should be renegotiated in mortal favor — that Bloomherbearers should serve shorter terms, surrender less, that the Court takes too much and gives too little back." Rowan set down the letter he'd been holding without appearing to read another word of it. "It's not an unreasonable position, on its face. Except Vane doesn't want *fairer* terms, Wren. He wants the Bloom's power redirected. Away from the land. Toward himself."

"That's not possible. Is it?"

"It shouldn't be." Rowan's jaw tightened. "But you weren't supposed to be chosen either, and here you are, wearing a Bloom no Council record predicted. I don't like coincidences that convenient. Not around something this old."

Chapter Five: The Vane Conspiracy

The truth, when it came, arrived sideways, the way truths at Court so often did — not through confrontation but through an old ledger Rowan found buried in the Warden archives, its ink faded but its meaning unmistakable.

Wren's grandmother had been a Bloombearer candidate herself, decades before, and had been passed over — not by chance, the ledger revealed, but *deliberately*, her Bloom-potential suppressed by a binding placed on her bloodline by a Council faction that considered the smithing houses too unpredictable, too stubborn, too likely to refuse a bargain outright.

"They buried your family's magic on purpose," Rowan said, laying the ledger open between them, his voice carefully level in the way she'd learned meant he was furious and controlling it. "For two generations. Until the suppression finally frayed enough that the bell found you anyway. You were never an anomaly, Wren. You were an inheritance someone tried and failed to erase."

"Vane knows this."

"Vane's family authored the suppression. I'd stake my title on it." Rowan closed the ledger, and for the first time since she'd met him, she saw something in his face that looked almost like fear — not for himself. "If he learns the suppression has broken, that your

Bloom carries more of the original bloodline's strength than any Bloombearer in a century, he won't try to renegotiate the pact anymore, Wren. He'll try to take you out of it. Cut the Bloom free of the land and bind it somewhere he controls instead."

"Can he do that?"

"Not while the binding holds between us." Rowan looked at her then, and the careful distance he'd maintained since the tower stairs was entirely gone. "Which is, I suspect, exactly why Isolde has been so interested in whether that binding is as strong as it looks."

Wren thought of the grove, of his hand closing around her wrist, of the words *there you are* spoken like something being recognized rather than something being claimed. "Is it?"

"I don't know how to answer that without it sounding like more than my job requires," Rowan said quietly. "So I'll just tell you the truth instead. Yes. It's stronger than it looks. It's stronger than I expected it to be, and I stopped being able to call that professional distance somewhere around the second night I taught you how to bow."

Chapter Six: The Broken Pact

They came for her at the dark hour before dawn, when the tower's wards were thinnest — not the Court's guard, but Vane's own mortal soldiers, led into Duskwood through a breach in the border seam that should never have existed, guided, Wren understood with a cold drop in her stomach, by Isolde herself.

"Nothing personal," Isolde said, as her soldiers closed around the tower room. "The Court chose to elevate a blacksmith's daughter over houses with real claim to the Bloom's power. My cousin simply intends to correct the oversight."

"By kidnapping me."

"By *relocating* you," Isolde said, "to a binding that answers to Veyth's council instead of a Court that's ignored mortal interests for three centuries. You should be thanking us. You'll finally serve people who look like you."

Wren didn't have time to answer before Rowan came through the tower door like something unleashed rather than something arriving, and the fight that followed was fast and ugly and entirely unlike the careful, contained man who'd taught her etiquette for three days straight. He was not gentle with Vane's soldiers. He was not gentle with Isolde, either, until the moment Wren realized — with the particular horror of watching someone she'd come to trust make a catastrophic choice — that Isolde had planned for

exactly this, had positioned her soldiers to draw Rowan away from Wren's side by design.

"Rowan!" she shouted, too late, as one of Vane's soldiers seized her from behind and pressed a cold iron shackle — not Court iron, something denser, something *wrong* — around her Bloom-marked wrist.

The Bloom screamed inside her. Not metaphorically — she felt it, a wrongness like a rope pulled taut past its breaking point, the binding between herself and Rowan straining under a suppression it hadn't been built to survive.

Rowan turned. For half a second his face held something that wasn't fear for himself at all, and then he was moving, and the last thing Wren saw before the shackle's magic dragged her under into darkness was his hand closing around empty air where her wrist had been a moment before.

Chapter Seven: The Iron Bloom

She woke in a cell of plain stone under Vane's manor, the false-iron shackle still locked around her wrist, and understood immediately that something in her had changed — not weakened, as the shackle was clearly designed to do, but *concentrated*, the Bloom's

warmth banked down into something denser and stranger than it had been in the grove.

Chancellor Aldric Vane visited her personally, which told her more than his words did. He was an unremarkable man in an unremarkable coat, and he studied her the way her father studied flawed iron — evaluating, not unkindly, exactly how much use could be salvaged.

"Your grandmother would have been easier to work with," he said. "Less magic to suppress means less magic to redirect. You, unfortunately, are considerably more than anyone accounted for. But power is power, Miss Ashcombe. It doesn't much matter whose hands hold the reins, so long as someone does."

"The Court will come for me."

"The Court has no jurisdiction on mortal soil, and your Warden has no standing to cross onto it uninvited. That is, in fact, the entire design." Vane smiled, the way a man smiles when he believes he has already won. "Rest. Tomorrow we redirect the Bloom properly. After that, none of this will matter to you at all."

He left. Wren sat alone in the dark, and did the only thing she had left to do — she stopped fighting the Bloom's strange new pressure inside her chest, and instead, exactly as Rowan had told her in the grove, let it find its own shape.

Let it find the shape of you. It already knows.

The flowers came first, blooming pale and fast along her collarbone, brighter than they'd ever been. Then the shackle — Vane's false iron, dense and wrong and never designed to hold a Bloom this strong — began to warp, its magic straining against something it had no framework to contain.

It broke at midnight, the same hour Rowan Duskvale came through the manor's outer wall like something the Court had unleashed rather than sent, jurisdiction be damned, the binding between them screaming across the border seam louder than any ward could muffle.

He found her standing over the shattered shackle, Bloom-marks bright as struck iron up both arms, and for a moment neither of them said anything at all.

"You came anyway," Wren said. "Jurisdiction be damned."

"I told you once that wanting out doesn't change what's in your blood." Rowan crossed the cell in three strides, and this time when his hand found her wrist, it wasn't to anchor a ritual — it was simply to hold on. "The same turned out to be true of me. I stopped being your Warden by obligation somewhere around the grove, Wren. Everything after that was just — mine to lose, if I let Vane keep you."

Vane's fall, when it came, came fast — a Council no longer willing to shield a man who'd sanctioned kidnapping a Bloomholder to serve his own ambition, a pact renegotiated not through Isolde's schemes but through Wren's own testimony, delivered in the Court's long glass gallery with her Bloom-marks bared for every noble house that had once written her family's power out of history.

They gave her new terms. Fairer ones. A Bloombearer's voice on the Council itself, the first in three centuries.

She kept the Warden, too — though by then, standing beside her in the grove where iron had first learned to bloom, Rowan Duskvale had long since stopped needing the title to explain why he stayed.

THE END

Author's note: This is a complete, original standalone romantasy. If you'd like, I can extend any chapter, add a sequel outline, write it in a different POV (dual POV is popular in the genre right now), or convert it into a formatted Word document or EPUB-style PDF.